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Chapter 8 - Real-time Online Reporting: Best Practices for Live Blogging

Neil Thurman

Real-time online reporting has a history that can be measured in decades. Britain's Guardian newspaper was covering live soccer matches on its website as early as 1999 (Thurman and Walters 2013, 99). That story—a "minute-by-minute" report on Manchester United's game against Arsenal on February 17 —was an early example of what, over recent years, has become a common and popular way for journalists to cover not only sport and other scheduled events, such as festivals and awards ceremonies, but also breaking news and ongoing political stories.

Contemporary live online reporting makes the most of converging technological platforms and includes not just text but a range of content including still and moving images and audio. Social media platforms are an important source of content, which is often embedded directly. The resulting news artefact is referred to using a variety of names, including "news streams', "live updating news pages", and "live blogs". This last term has been adopted for the purposes of this chapter. Live blogs are becoming increasingly common, with, for example, the Guardian's website publishing close to 150 per month (Thurman and Walters 2013, 82). They are also a relatively popular news format: a nine-country survey showed an average of about 15 percent of regular online news consumers use them on a weekly basis (Thurman and Newman 2014). Those levels of reach are complemented by a high degree of engagement, with readers spending, on average, between six and 24 minutes on any given live blog, more time than is typical for visits to online news in other formats (Thurman and Newman 2014; Thurman and Walters 2013, 87).

This chapter examines opportunities, risks, and best practices in live blogging. It ends with a suggested exercise involving a scheduled news event and a live blogging platform.

OPPORTUNITIES AND RISKS

Live online reporting presents a number of opportunities, both to journalists individually, and to journalism as an institution. There are also, however, some attendant risks. Of the opportunities the most obvious is, perhaps, the way in which live blogs allow journalists—almost irrespective of the resources at their disposal—to report at speed, on an almost real-time basis. As well as empowering individual reporters and community or other small, specialist news outlets, live blogs enable news organizations with a background in print to compete against rivals with broadcast parentage in the coverage of breaking news and live events. They are also of value to broadcast news organizations by providing them with a format that works on devices, such as smartphones, and at locations of consumption, such as the office, where a purely audio-visual news presentation is less than optimal.

Less obvious, perhaps, is how live blogging seems to be offering news organizations an opportunity to rebuild trust with their audiences, and—should they so wish—to increase participation. Surveys of news consumers have shown that live blogs are perceived as being

more balanced and / or factual than traditional articles because of the range of opinions they present, the links they provide to sources and supporting documents, and their "neutral" tone (Thurman and Newman 2014; Thurman and Walters 2013, 96). Thurman and Walters' study (97) also indicated that audiences are "more than twice as likely to participate in live blogs compared with other article types", although, at the time of writing, no other research had corroborated this finding. However, the volume of readers' contributions being submitted to some live blogs (Thurman and Rodgers 2014) indicates high levels of participation are possible.

The speed with which live blogging allows reporting to be conducted is an opportunity, but it also carries risks. Live blogs at the Guardian's website are updated, on average, about every 10 minutes over the course of their six-hour duration (Thurman and Walters 2013, 90).[1] This places a considerable burden on the journalists involved—there are typically two or three (91)—and means that there is little time for factual verification. Editorial oversight may also be minimal because of technical factors (92). The most serious risk with live blogging then is that a serious error of fact or interpretation will be made in what the Guardian's Paul Lewis[2] calls "the rush to do regular updates" (94). The potential for this to happen is, Lewis believes, compounded by how, in the practice of live blogging, a "new view" has emerged that tolerates the publication of unverified information (albeit labelled as such) accompanied by an invitation for readers to "determine how accurate it is" (ibid.).

One example of the publication of false information in a live blog occurred during the *Guardian'*s live coverage (Davis and Evans 2011) of the "March for the Alternative" protest against UK Government cuts on March 26, 2011. A contributor, Chris Snell, a Google employee, took a photograph of the Lillywhites department store in London with smoke appearing to come from the back of the building, tweeting the picture with the text "Lillywhites on fire piccadilly circus" (Snell 2011). The Guardian, along with a number of other websites, included this tweet on their live blog, with the comment "There are reports on Twitter that the sports clothing store Lillywhites is now on fire". It turned out, however, that Lillywhites was not on fire: the source of the smoke was elsewhere (Davis and Evans 2011).

On other occasions, however, the Guardian has been one of the few news organizations not to be hoaxed. Following the death of Osama Bin Laden in May 2011, a picture purporting to show his dead body circulated in social and mainstream media (Newman 2011). The Guardian, suspicious of the photograph, decided not to use it (Paul Lewis, personal communication, June 8, 2011). The image turned out to be a fake.

Although, as has been shown, live blogs can engage some readers for considerable lengths of time, they are not universally popular. Research has shown their presentation of updates in reverse chronological order, as well as their fragmented structure, can confuse readers. Over 25 percent of regular online news consumers in the United Kingdom say live blogs are "difficult to understand" (Thurman and Newman 2014). Readers have also complained about decisions to use the format on stories that they believe did not warrant the intense scrutiny or informal tone that live blogs bring (Thurman and Walters 2013, 97).

A final risk relates to the costs of live online coverage which, as we have seen, can consume considerable amounts of journalists' time. As newsroom budgets are being reduced, what might have to be cut back to support any increase in live online reporting? As the editor of the BBC News website, Steve Herrmann, says, "there is still a need for self-contained, structured reporting and analysis and for narrative storytelling" (quoted in Thurman and Newman [2014]). The BBC, in common with other news organizations, is still working out the editorial and financial implications of "trying to do both" (ibid.).

BEST PRACTICES

Choosing What, and What Not, to Live Blog

With live blogs now often the default format for online coverage of breaking news, they may seem the obvious choice for many stories. However, journalists and editors should exercise discretion when deciding whether to deploy the format. Considerations include: the magnitude of the event; the resources available; and whether, for a particular story, a live blog—with its informal, conversational style—is appropriate. Some readers interviewed for Thurman and Walters' study (2013) expressed irritation when live blogs were used on what they saw as trivial stories, such as "Radiohead releasing an album" or "[the] Sarah Palin emails". Concern was also expressed about the live blogging of some sensitive events: one reader thought that the live blogging of the aftermath of a series of shootings in the English county of Cumbria in June 2010, when there were unidentified victims and an active police pursuit of the perpetrator (ultimately discovered to be Derrick Bird), was "ghoulish" (unpublished survey results, August, 2011).

Choosing a Platform

Although, at its simplest, a live news stream need be no more than a series of time-stamped textual updates, it is now possible for—and audiences expect—such streams to contain:

- A headline
- A summary of the key story developments
- Pre-recorded and / or live video and audio
- Photographs and illustrations
- Maps and data graphics
- Embedded social media content such as tweets
- Hypertext links
- Readers' comments

The content management systems used in most online newsrooms can handle some or all of these elements, but most cannot bring them together in the manner expected of live blogs—

that is, on a single page with updates presented in reverse chronological order. To do that, some news organizations, including Guardian.com and BBC News online, have adapted their existing content management systems, while others have bought in specialist live blogging software such as ScribbleLive or CoveritLive (Reuters, the Wall Street Journal, and CNN.com for example).

The differing ways these various live blogging platforms handle key content elements—such as readers' comments—can have consequences on levels of reader participation, as well as on the feel and tone of the live blogs that result. For this reason the choice of platform is more than just a resource or technical decision. It should also be informed by, and will impact on, editorial considerations such as the prominence to be given to readers' contributions.

Preparation

Covering a live event successfully in any medium requires preparation. Although, with live blogging, 'dead air' time can be longer than in live TV or radio, there will be periods during the coverage of a live event, particularly at the start, when previously researched and written posts will be vital. They help to set the context for the live coverage by providing background information on the people and place involved, and the purpose of the event. The Guardian's sports reporter Rob Smyth spends half an hour "constructing the preamble" before live blogging soccer matches (personal communication, July 6, 2011), and Heidi Stephens, who has live blogged The Apprentice TV show for Guardian.com, "always write[s] the intro section in advance" (Heidi Stephens, personal communication, June 14, 2011). Live online coverage of any scheduled event can be greatly enhanced if the verified social media feeds of any participants (individual or institutional) and attendees are identified and followed, along with any Twitter hashtags created for, or particularly relevant to, the event. Such feeds will provide leads, and quotations or media content that can be incorporated directly into the live blog.

Aggregation and Links

Live blogs are characterized by the generous use of hyperlinks and a relatively high proportion of quoted material. Thurman and Walters (2013, 91) found an average of 16.25 hyperlinks per live blog at the Guardian. By comparison, Stray (2010) found the median number of links in regular news articles at 12 news sites he surveyed to be 2.6. Thurman and Walters' survey also showed that live blogs covering breaking news and ongoing public-affairs stories contained, on average, one third substantive quotes. Live blogs give journalists the freedom to aggregate comment and supplementary material on stories, and to exceed the 400–500 word limit of a typical news story.[3] Andrew Sparrow, the Guardian's Senior Political Correspondent, considers hyperlinks within live blogs to be "crucial", going as far as to say that "they are actually what [live blogging is] all about", because a "large chunk" of live blogs is aggregation (personal communication, June 13, 2011).

Best practice in this area is to attribute transparently, signposting quotations using, for example, block quotes and / or graphical devices such as large quotation marks. It is preferable if source material is linked to directly. Offering such links is, Andrew Sparrow

suggests, “absolutely essential to the way web journalism ought to operate”, because it adds value “in a way that newsprint can’t”. He warns, however, that this only “works if you are linking to stuff that is good and relevant and interesting” (personal communication, June 13, 2011). As we have seen, aggregating a range of opinions on a story, and providing links to sources and supporting documents, are characteristics of live blogs that contribute to readers’ perceptions that the format is more balanced and / or factual than traditional articles. For much more on best practices in hyperlinking, see Juliette De Maeyer’s chapter in this book.

Making Live Blogs Usable

A quarter of readers find live blogs difficult to follow (Thurman and Newman 2014). This is unsurprising because, first, unlike in a traditional news story written using an inverted pyramid structure, the most newsworthy information in a live blog may appear anywhere on the page. Second, live blogs are presented in reverse chronological order, with the most recent update first. This reversal of our expectation for stories to be told from beginning to end, can, understandably, be confusing.

To counter these problems of usability it is important that journalists follow best practice by providing contextual information in the form of a headline and summary of key developments. This contextual information should appear above the live story frame, in a prominent position at the top of the page, and should be rewritten as frequently as the story changes. The ScribbleLive platform makes the publishing of such contextual information relatively straightforward through its ‘LiveArticle’ feature, which allows the headline and summary to be edited with the same tool used to control the live story, and to be embedded at the top of the live blog in a way that always shows the latest versions without the reader having to refresh their browser window. Both before and after live online coverage has finished, some readers like to read live blogs from beginning to end (Thurman and Walters 2013). To facilitate this, it may be useful, as the Guardian has done, to provide readers with the ability to view the live blog in chronological rather than reverse chronological order.

Sourcing and Verification

Live blogging journalists use a range of sources appropriate to the event being covered, including: social media networks, such as Twitter and YouTube; live television streams; news agency wires; subscription information services (such as Politicshome.com and Cricinfo); phone calls, face-to-face meetings, emails or text messages with contacts (who may or may not have official affiliation); and websites (sometimes via RSS feeds).

The speed at which live blogs are updated, the expectation that they will be on top of the latest developments, and their open, aggregating nature present a set of potentially conflicting demands on journalists. In journalists’ attempts to keep abreast of developments, social media networks, particularly Twitter, are vital, but the volume of content on these networks, and the range of sources that the content emanates from, are such that particular tools and practices are required in order that material can be identified and some degree of verification can be carried out within the limited time available.

Editors and social media specialists in newsrooms use a range of tools, such as TweetDeck and HootSuite, which allow simple filtering and organization of social media streams (Schifferes et al. 2014). These filters do not, however, offer any means for journalists to assess the credibility of information. For that, some have experimented with tools such as Klout or PeerIndex in an attempt to gauge the reliability of contributors, but have mostly found these tools to be "insufficiently granular to help … make judgments on authenticity in a fast-moving news story" (Schifferes et al. 2014). Alfred Hermida's chapter on verification contains more information on some of the latest tools and techniques in this area.

In the absence of a set of tools able to adequately surface trends or assess the credibility of social media content, many live blogging journalists have relied on Twitter lists of known and trusted sources. Andrew Sparrow, who writes The Guardian's 'Politics Live' live blog, works "by and large … with a relatively narrow patch of usual suspects and I know who they are". A similar practice has been adopted by Guardian reporter Matthew Weaver, who is the primary author of their 'Middle East Live' live blog: "I'll be doing Syria or Yemen, and I won't be looking at generic search terms, I'll be looking at lists of people who we know are there" (quoted in Thurman and Walters [2013]).

With journalists often required to report at great speed via live blogs, such reliance on known sources is an understandable coping strategy. However, it is impossible to predict exactly where a new fact or observation will emanate from, so monitoring secondary networks and metadata (such as Twitter hashtags) is also important. How this is done depends, in part, on the resources available. Some live blogging journalists at the Guardian are supported by 'community coordinators' who utilize social media tools more widely, feeding the results back to the journalists. As well as monitoring Twitter hashtags to build up a picture of a developing situation, the community coordinators also delve more deeply into social networks, as Laura Oliver, community coordinator, news, explained: "[Journalists] will have their own [Twitter] lists of correspondents which is a great place to start and then what we do … is look at the secondary network. Who are the correspondents talking to? Who are they linking to?" (personal communication, June 17, 2011).

The reliance on mediated communication is somewhat inevitable given that the practice of live blogging demands a fast, reliable Internet connection most often found in the office. However, as with any form of journalism, it is, as Paul Lewis cautions, always best to go and experience a story in person: "With live blogging ... you have this view that there are lots of other people out there who are your eyes and ears. They can be really useful ... but your vantage point is a computer screen in an office block in London, and as a journalist you always find out more when you're there. Always." (quoted in Thurman and Walters [2013])

The degree to which live blogs should publish unverified information (even with caveats) is, perhaps, the key ethical issue with the format. Some journalists are comfortable with how the conversational tone of live blogs, compared with the more authoritative 'inverted pyramid' news story, allows the reader "in on the workflow of the journalist … saying 'Look this is out there, help us verify it'" (Matthew Weaver, quoted in Thurman and Walters [2013]). Matt Wells, the Guardian's US Blogs and Network Editor, is of a similar mind, saying that if

something “might be quite important” but cannot be verified by the news organization it is okay to “flag it up” and ask the audience “to help verify it” (personal communication, June 17, 2011). Other journalists, however, are more cautious. Lewis says if “we’re not sure whether or not this is true … don’t put it out. Our job is to find out whether or not it’s true, not to put it out and ask people to decide for us” (personal communication, June 8, 2011).

Audience Participation

Encouraging readers to help verify material that has been sourced on Twitter or YouTube and published on a live blog is one form of audience participation. Live blogs can, of course, be a direct source of material in their own right. This form of user-generated content is rather different from that found on social media channels because, as we’ll see, it:

- Often comes via email
- May involve regular contributors
- Is prompted by the content and / or functionality of the live blog itself

Live blogging journalists covering certain fast-moving live events do not always have time to consult social media. For example, Heidi Stephens says that because The Apprentice “moves at a million miles an hour and there are no ad breaks, I haven’t got time to check what people are saying on Twitter” (personal communication, June 14, 2011). Rob Smyth agrees: “[live blogging sports events] is quite a busy process and it would be difficult to keep an eye on Twitter” (personal communication, July 6, 2011).

As a result, email has become a way to keep in touch without being overwhelmed by information. For Rob Smyth, email is the source of 95 percent of incoming communication during a live blog (personal communication, July 6, 2011). Indeed, when the Guardian considered adding a comments section to cricket and football live blogs, there was resistance from some journalists because of the additional user-generated content that would result, and because of a feeling that “the quality of contributions you get via email is much higher” (Rob Smyth, personal communication, July 6, 2011). Some readers make regular contributions via email, becoming favoured sources: “There is one chap ... who really should be paid by The Guardian…. he’s quite witty and insightful … during a really busy game you look at your inbox and if you’ve got 50 emails you’re immediately going to be drawn towards [him]” (Rob Smyth, personal communication, July 6, 2011).

Comments on live blogs, when enabled, can become a source in their own right. Guardian blogs producer Paul Owen recounts that, during the 2011 protests in Bahrain, “readers posted really good first-hand accounts in the comments section” (personal communication, June 9, 2011). In live blogs of scheduled events, comments may also play a part (Heidi Stephens, personal communication, June 14, 2011), although volume is a problem. As Matt Wells explained, “if you get any more than a hundred comments it becomes impossible to write the live blog and read the comments” (personal communication, June 17, 2011). As a result, readers or community coordinators may be co-opted to help. “I haven’t got time to check the

comment box myself, so a lady called Hilary Wardle (another commenter who is a keen blogger on the side) keeps an eye on the comment box for me and emails over the best bits" (Heidi Stephens, personal communication, June 14, 2011). Part of Laura Oliver's role as a community coordinator at the Guardian is, she says, "to flag up useful things in the comment thread" (personal communication, June 17, 2011).

However, despite having such help, live blogging journalists at Guardian.com use very few readers' comments in the live blog proper. In their analysis of 20 live blogs at Guardian.com, Thurman and Walters (2013) found that, on average, the comments sections of live blogs contained 62 comments, but only 1.2 percent of those comments were taken 'above the line'. By contrast, Thurman and Newman (2014) have shown that a sample of live blogs (n=11) published on the ScribbleLive platform contained between 21–50 percent reader contributions, partly because of the way that the ScribbleLive platform "puts reader testimony and comment on a par with that of journalists" (ibid).

Making Corrections

As we have already seen, the speed with which live blogs are updated, and their conversational tone, contribute to a "relatively loose culture of corroboration" (Thurman and Walters, 2013). Indeed, some journalists appear to have accepted that unverified material will be posted. It is, therefore, important that correction practices are transparent and unambiguous. Tim Currie's contribution to this book covers handling mistakes via corrections and unpublishing in detail. The present chapter will highlight an example of best practice specific to live blogs, courtesy of The Guardian's Andrew Sparrow:

> If I've got something substantially wrong I will acknowledge that—within the [live] blog—as quickly as possible in the most recent post. What I will also do is go back to the original post. I won't do an invisible mend [rather] I will insert a correction within the original post. If you just correct it in the most recent post—the nature of these [live] blogs is that they get very long and people skim read them rather than read them in detail—it's quite possible someone will see the original erroneous post but not pick up the subsequent correction (quoted in Thurman and Walters [2013]).

The use of the word 'substantially' is important in Sparrow's statement. Where the error is minor (like a typo) Sparrow makes an "invisible mend". To put up a new post highlighting each minor error would adversely affect usability.

CONCLUSION

Some of the practices of live blogging outlined in this chapter hold out hope that the crisis of journalism's business models and the disruptions caused by the introduction of new technology will not inevitably lead to a crisis of ethics. As Lawrie Zion writes in the introduction to this book, "many practitioners are addressing questions about how journalism's mission to inform, enlighten and entertain might be renewed in more open and collaborative ways". With live blogs, that openness has manifested itself in a number of ways. First, the finest examples of the format are not afraid to draw attention to error: best

practice for making corrections in live blogs involves not only changing the erroneous post, but also flagging up the original error in the live stream, making the very fact of the correction a micro news story in its own right. A second manifestation of this openness can be seen in the adoption by the best live blogs of transparent attribution practices, and in their use of a relatively wide range of sources. The extent to which such sourcing practices are a genuine renewal of established professional norms is, however, still to be determined. Although, in some examples of the format, we see a significant move towards openness and collaboration, in other cases, despite technology having changed how journalists communicate with their sources, it has done less to change who those sources are.

Best practices in action: First steps in live blogging

For anyone looking to learn some of the best practices in live blogging identified in this chapter, I would recommend selecting a scheduled news event. Seminars and conferences are ideal for a number of reasons:

- They have defined locations and start and end times, making attendance easy to plan.
- Because their programs are advertised in advance, it is easy to do background research on speakers and contributors. Such research is invaluable in order that pre-written background material can be prepared and used to provide context to the live coverage and to fill 'dead air' time. It also means that contributors' social media streams (particularly on Twitter) can be identified ahead of time, for monitoring during the live coverage.
- They offer opportunities—depending on students' needs and abilities—for both passive coverage of the event as it plays out, and for more active coverage via, for example, interviews with participants and vox pops with attendees.
- They are usually at venues that are both safe and likely to have Wi-Fi and power, essential for journalists undertaking live coverage from an external location over a period of several hours.

ScribbleLive is a good platform for writing and publishing live stories online. Not only is it used by major news organizations, it is also relatively easy to learn, and available via a 30-day free trial. It is a hosted service that uses an online content management system (or CMS) that can be accessed through any web browser. The CMS supports a variety of levels of access, from 'administrator' through 'editor' to 'moderated writer', and allows different editing privileges and levels of access to be assigned to different contributors. Social media content from YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook can be searched from within the CMS and, once identified, incorporated into the live story. Readers can also contribute directly by submitting comments via the live blog itself. These comments can be subjected to various levels of moderation, including automated filtering based on excluded keywords (for example racist or sexist terms), and full moderation by a human moderator. User contributions that pass the moderation process are published in the main section of the live story with the same level of prominence as posts from contributors with direct access to the CMS. The live story

is hosted on ScribbleLive's servers and has its own dedicated URL, but can also be embedded (using simple HTML code) into any other website. The important contextual information that should surround any live blog—giving the story's current headline and summary of key developments—can be separately managed from within ScribbleLive's CMS via the 'LiveArticle' function.

Discussion Points

Should news organisations invest more resources in live blogging at the expense of traditional reporting?

In your view what sort of stories are unsuitable for covering via a live blog?

Do you agree that it is ok to publish unverified information on a live blog if it is labelled as such?

Do you believe that live blogs will turn out to be a more collaborative and pluralistic news format?

Overall, are live blogs ethically strengthening journalism in the digital era?

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[1] Some live blogging journalists, particularly on sport, try to post updates more regularly than this. Rob Smyth, for example, tries to leave "no more than two minute gaps" when live blogging soccer matches for Guardian.com (personal communication, July 6, 2011).
[2] At the time of interview Special Projects Editor at *The Guardian* who has live blogged events including the Inquest on the death of Ian Tomlinson, who died after being pushed to the ground by police in London during a protest march.
[3] Thurman and Walters (2013, 91) found live blogs at *The Guardian* averaged 4,031 words.